The King of America

By Richard Mitchell

The Associated Press
SHAMOKIN, PA.—A plaque etched with a lesser-known Benjamin Franklin quotation was removed from a wall at a vocational school here at the order of the state civil rights coordinator, who said the slogan's use of "he" was sexist. The official, Glenn Dean Davis, was inspecting the Northumberland County Vocational-Technical School during the summer when he noticed the plaque, which reads, "He who hath a trade, hath an estate," said school director James Buggy.

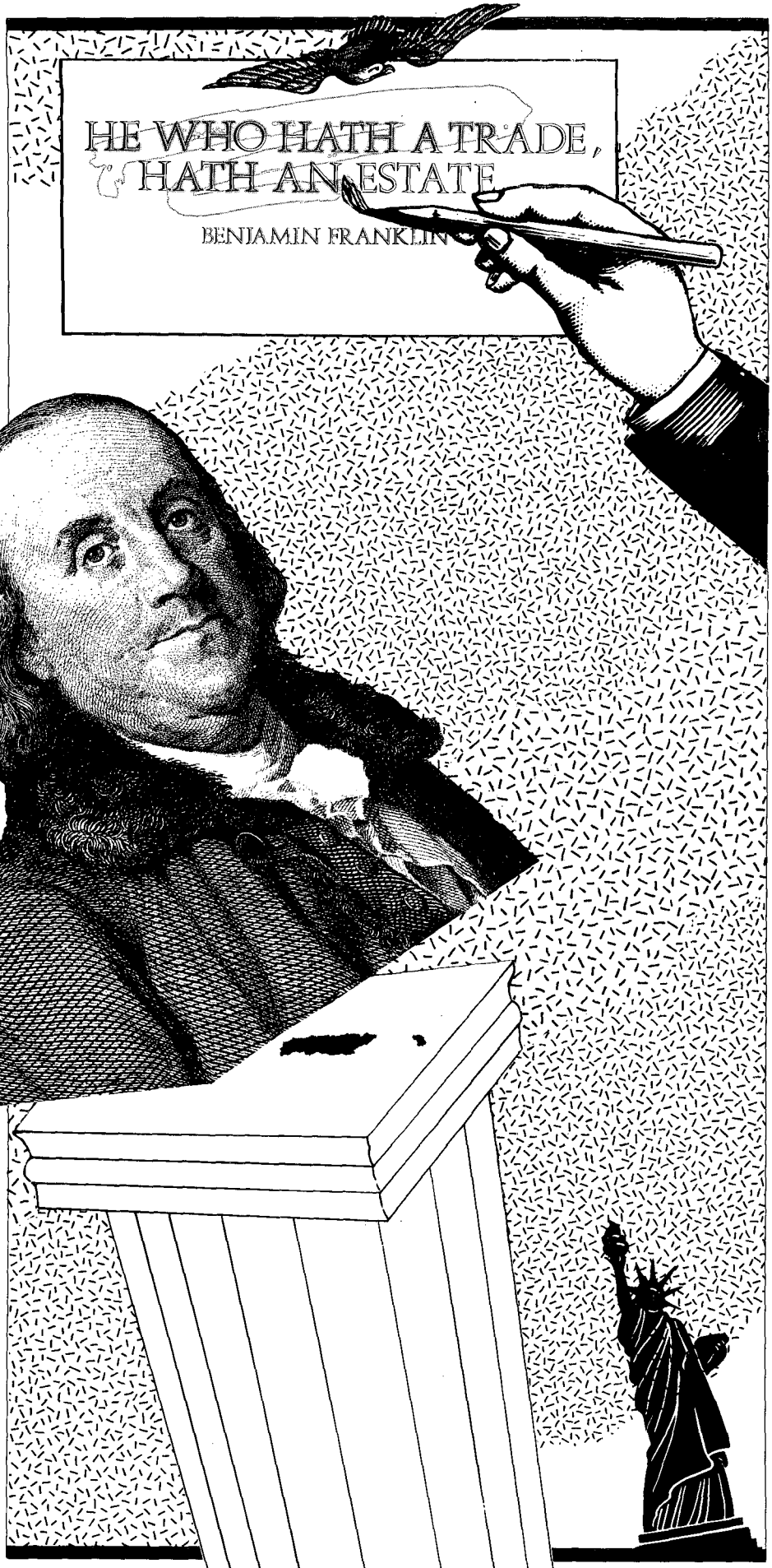
Davis contended the use of "he" discriminated against women and the school removed it, Buggy said.

If concepts are not clear, words do not fit. If words do not fit, the day's work cannot be accomplished, morals and art do not flourish. If morals and art do not flourish, punishments are not just. If punishments are not just, the people do not know where to put hand or foot.

CONFUCIUS, *Analects,* XIII, *3*

When Ben Franklin came forth from Independence Hall, an old tale tells, he was met on the steps by an old woman who asked, "What are we to have, Mr. Franklin, a republic or a king?" "A republic," he replied, "if you can keep it." It was an answer perfectly typical of his most characteristic frame of mind, good cheer salted with skepticism.

He would not be astonished, therefore, to learn that the Americans had not, after all, been able to keep their republic and had chosen instead to put their lives, liberties, and even their pursuits into the keeping of a very nice king. Nevertheless, we would not like to have to explain to Mr. Franklin



how that came to happen. He might ask embarrassing questions. But, armed as we now are with exemplary tidings from Shamokin, we would be happy indeed to elucidate for the elderly gent his doubtless unwitting, and surely *ex post facto*, but nevertheless egregious transgression, in the use of "he," against the wise and kindly laws of our sovereign.

No man at any time hath seen the King of America, which is to say, of course, lest compassion cease among us, that no man or woman or child of either sex, born or unborn, hath at any time seen the King of America, or the Queen of America, as we would surely call him if he *were* the Queen of America, lest some little girl chance upon these words and suppose herself debarred, or even *deemed* debarred, from high and comfortable office in the land of opportunity and suffer thus the admittedly unknowable but surely dreadful consequences of not feeling about herself exactly as she ought to feel if we are to remain a great nation with liberty and justice for all and even, someday, be just like the Japanese, only more so.

You see, Ben, it *can* be done. It's partly a matter of prose style. With a little more thought and diligence—informed, to be sure, by an enhanced social awareness—you too could have written well, rather than just blurting out, in such childish little words, what is, after all, nothing more significant than one man's personal opinion, and a man, furthermore, who is known actually to have called fools "fools" and knaves "knaves." That's discrimination. The trick is in the language, Ben, which is why it doesn't matter at all that no one has ever seen him. He is the King of our language, and thus the King of our minds. We know him as well as we need to, and entirely by hearsay. Whatever he may say, we will hear.

He says, for instance, that one of his officers, a certain Glenn Dean Davis, is a civil rights coordinator. We hear. And we obey, but not, as you might imagine, out of servility, oh no, but out of our enhanced perceptions of social responsibility. We are not a people who would leave our civil rights to languish uncoordinated.

Nor would we ask, as you seem about to ask, "What *trade* hath he, who is a 'civil rights coordinator'? What is *done* when his 'work' is done, what made or mended, what worth increased or usefulness enlarged? Could he set up shop for himself, making prudent provision for all of his progeny not only of substance but

of its means, the life of decent industry and seemly self-reliance that any free man would prefer to bounden service and that any good father would want to bequeath to his sons? Should he hang out his shingle above his own door, would his custom be great, clients aplenty in pressing need of civil rights coordination? Or can he do his 'work' only at the bidding and pleasure of your King, whose pleasure, in another season, may change, leaving his faithful servant to live by a 'trade' that is of no use at all to anyone but the King?"

No more do we wonder, "What *are* these 'civil' rights? How are they to be distinguished from other kinds of rights? Can there be *kinds* of rights at all? Whose right to what is this man coordinating, whatever that might mean, when he removes some words from public view? Are there some words that your King would not have his subjects read, that he sends his servants far and wide to sniff them out? If there were other servants of your King, all tradeless men who could not live except the King employ them, and set to seek out witches, would witches not multiply marvelously among you?"

What trade hath he, who is a "civil rights coordinator"?

Such questions, Ben, we know better than to ask. They have nothing to do with the real necessities of real life in a real democracy. They are nothing but language questions. Just talk. And what would come of weighing them? More talk. That's all. We are a nation of doers, Ben. We are not going to sit around and leave undone the vital work of the coordination of our civil rights just because we don't happen to know what that means. We do have to be practical, you know. It is far better to set people free than to ponder, in unproductive idleness, the meaning of freedom, which can end in nothing more profitable than a collection of words.

Besides, you can be very sure that insofar as we need to know them, the meanings of such technical terms as *civil rights coordination* and *freedom* have already been dealt with in countless official documents prepared by official servants of our King, and in the official language of our King, which, you might take note, scrupulously avoids the error of any form of discrimination. Would you not, to know the work of the mason, have gone to the mason? Who better, then, to tell us the work of civil rights coordination than those who do it? Who better to tell us about freedom than those who are paid to provide it?

Reflect for a moment, Ben, on Confucius, who was, as you must by now understand, an unmitigated discriminator. And a sexist. A disciple once put to him this question: What would be the first thing you would do if you were suddenly handed the reins of government? To that, the wily heathen replied that he would first settle down to a good long bout of the "clarification of concepts." The disciple, expecting something practical, was astonished, but we are not. We know all too well the ways of these elitists.

Consider, now, the inevitable consequences of that seemingly innocent proposal, and consider, too, how readily we would all be taken in by that cunning absolutist if we fell into the habit of considering seriously questions like those you are eager to ask. If we did that, our concepts might become clear. If our concepts were clear, our words would fit, and we would give a civil rights coordinator quite another name. His function, too, and the "civil rights" themselves, we would come to designate in terms other than official. Such looseness of speech must inevitably make thousands of the servants of the King, and their incessant labors in our behalf, seem little short of ludicrous, thus undermining our faith in Democracy.

And there's even worse. If our words were to fit, the day's work would get done. When the carpenter has built the house, the house is built; when Civil Rights Coordinator Glenn Dean Davis has prudently hidden from the eyes of the exquisitely sensitive your unfeeling slur, no house is built. All of the work is still to be done. Making the world a better place for the greater good of the greater number may not be what you so quaintly call "a trade," but if you can get paid for doing it, it makes one hell of a good job.

And if such jobs were not done for us by servants of our King, Ben, we would be left to *ourselves* to consider what is right and just; and should we want to live according to our considerations, we would actually have to *choose* to do so. And should we form the habit of such choosing, of distinguishing the better from the worse, following the better, fleeing the worse, which is just another way of discrimination, there would soon break forth among us a calamitous plague of morals and art. Morals and art are just what we can expect from people who imagine that they *can* choose between the better and the worse, bestowing esteem only on the estimable and denying tolerance to the intolerable.

If such people abounded among us, could we remain the land of opportunity? How could the sellers sell, the convincers convince, the promoters promote? Are they not sellers, convincers, promoters, all of those tradeless detectors of better and worse in *other* people? Why should they suffer the cruel and unusual punishment of justice, ridicule, disregard, and unmitigated joblessness? Such would surely be their lot in a land where it is supposed that people can read your words for themselves and where it is also supposed that whosoever *is* offended can find remedy both sufficient and salutary in saying, and thus in *learning*: Keep your advice, Mr. Franklin. I will figure out for myself, thank you, how best to live in this world, to what work I will put my hand and on what path to put my foot. I will even decide for myself, Sir, where to put my thumb, which is, just now, as I wish you could see, firmly pressed to the tip of my nose.

And that, Ben, is exactly the sort of antisocial behavior that would afflict us as the result of the clarification of our concepts and the consequent loss of *all* of our coordinators. Long live the King, Ben, long live the King! ◻

Richard Mitchell's most recent book is Tower of Babble. *This article is adapted from his publication* The Underground Grammarian.